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The Child of Decrepitude: Sexual Incompetence in "Tristram Shandy"

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THE CHILD OF DECREPITUDE:
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SEXUAL INCOMPETENCE IN TRISTRAM SHANDY

A Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Nancy Joe Weeks
1977

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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ABSTRACT

This paper is a study of the sexual incompetence of the two senior Shandys, Walter and Toby, and the threat exposure to their sexual incompetence seems to pose to the wellbeing and virility of Tristram Shandy. This threat is carried out by five incidents, Tristram's five misfortunes, all of which are linked in some way to the sexual incompetence of at least one of the senior Shandys. Tristram's first four misfortunes are grouped together about the time of his conception and his birth. The first of these is his conception itself. The other three are symbolic castrations: a broken nose, a butchered name, and a mutilated pair of jack-boots. The fifth and last of his misfortunes takes place when he is five years old and is another symbolic castration, an inadvertent circumcision by a falling window sash.

The first part of the paper is concerned with the forms and origin of each Shandy brother's sexual incompetence. Walter's section deals with the decay of his virility, his loss of physical prowess and interest in the sexual act, his difficulty in impregnation, and the possibility that the intensity of his intellectual preoccupations is the result of sexual sublimation. Toby's section deals with his castration, his sexual embarrassment, and with his hobby horse, his fortification monomania, as an outgrowth of his attempt at dealing with the trauma of his castration.

The second part of the paper examines the role each Shandy brother's sexual incompetence plays in the five misfortunes threatening Tristram's life and manhood, particularly those misfortunes attending his birth. In addition to these five misfortunes, the very real danger threatening Tristram is made appreciable by two symbolic enactments of his birth. The first is Slop's encounter with Obadiah, in which Dr. Slop, as Tristram's surrogate, is violently "delivered" into six inches of mud by Obadiah. The second enactment, in which Slop slices his own thumb while frantically "delivering" his instruments from his green baize bag, prefigures his crushing of Tristram's nose.

In conclusion, it is found that while his five misfortunes have done Tristram little physical damage, growing up surrounded by sexual incompetence, and under the shadow of so many symbolic castrations has given the adult Tristram serious doubts about his own virility. This sexual insecurity is the ultimate toll exposure to the sexual incompetence of his father and uncle has taken on Tristram Shandy.

THE CHILD OF DECREPITUDE:
SEXUAL INCOMPETENCE IN TRISTRAM SHANDY

The Child of Decrepitude:

Sexual Incompetence in
Tristram Shandy

In his introduction to The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, James A. Work takes note of the "dubious halo" of sexual incompetence Laurence Sterne has suspended over the heads of all the Shandy males.¹ In addition to placing the virility of every male Shandy in doubt, Sterne seems to imply that youthful exposure to these sexually impaired males may be hazardous to one's own wellbeing and virility. The sexually impaired males are Walter and Toby Shandy, the victim in question is young Tristram, and the dangers to which he is exposed are very real. These dangers, the dark streaks beneath the bright surface, add a further dimension to Sterne's obstetrical comedy, the suspense and chiaroscuro of life itself.

The threat the Shandy brothers' sexual incompetence poses to Tristram's own virility is carried out by five incidents, Tristram's five misfortunes, all of which are linked in some way to the sexual incompetence of at least one of the senior Shandys. Tristram's first four misfortunes are grouped together about the time of his conception and his birth. The first of these is his conception itself. The other three are symbolic castrations: a broken nose, a butchered name, and a mutilated pair of jack-boots. The fifth and last of his misfortunes takes place when he is five years old and is another symbolic castration, an inadvertent circumcision by a falling window sash.

The first part of this paper explores the origins of the "dubious halos" hanging over the two senior Shandys and describes the shapes which each brother's halo takes. Walter's section deals with his loss of sexual prowess, his difficulty in impregnation, and the possibility that his intellectual preoccupations are the result of an unconscious repression of his sexuality. Toby's section deals with his castration, his sexual embarrassment, and his fortifications as an outgrowth of his attempt at reducing the trauma of his castration.

The second part of this paper examines the role each Shandy brother's sexual incompetence plays in the five misfortunes threatening Tristram's life and manhood, particularly those misfortunes attending his birth. However, since Sterne never intrudes on the privacy of Mrs. Shandy's bedchamber by describing her actual confinement, one must look elsewhere to appreciate the seriousness of the danger to which Tristram is exposed. Sterne dramatizes these dangers twice "below stairs," first in a muddy lane and then in the Shandy parlor by two symbolic enactments of Tristram's birth. The first of these is Dr. Slop's encounter with Obadiah in which Dr. Slop, as Tristram's surrogate, is violently "delivered" into six inches of mud by Obadiah. The second, in which Slop slices his own thumb while frantically "delivering" his instruments from his green baize bag, prefigures his crushing of Tristram's nose.²

Walter Shandy's sexual incompetence exists on the physical, emotional, and intellectual levels of his being. Since his incompetence takes a different form on each of these levels, and since the interrelationship of these different forms is complex, a concise, "shorthand" definition of what is meant by each is helpful prior to the main discussion. Walter Shandy's physical incompetence appears as a near inability to impregnate, while his emotional incompetence is shown by his loss of sexual interest and mechanization of the sexual act. These two manifestations are straightforward enough, both involving a plain loss of sexual ability. The intellectual form of his sexual incompetence, his intense preoccupation with esoteric theories and systems, presents more of a problem. This preoccupation is directly related to the deflection of his basic sexual drives from a physical to an intellectual level, but whether this deflection is the result or cause of his loss of sexual prowess is problematical. The novel does not contain evidence conclusive enough to settle this question beyond doubt, but what evidence there is suggests that his deflection of sexual energy to the intellect came first, and was the cause of his loss of physical prowess.

The intellectual form of Walter Shandy's sexual incompetence began with the probably unconscious subordination of what had once been a troublesome virility to intellectuality. In telling of his father's attitude toward Uncle Toby's affair with the Widow Wadman, Tristram makes it plain that his father had never taken easily to the physical and physiological manifestations of his sexuality:

My father, as appears from many of his papers, was very subject to this passion, before he married -----but from a little subacid kind of drollish impatience in his nature, whenever it befell him, he would never submit to it like a christian; but would pish, and huff, and bounce, and kick, and play the Devil, and write the bitterest Philippicks against the eye that ever man wrote----- ... In short during the whole paroxysm, my father was all abuse and foul language, approaching rather towards malediction ...
(pp. 578-579)

Walter Shandy considered sexuality, the physical aspect of love, as an imposition upon the higher faculties of man and found it a pity that the procreation of mankind should:

be done by means of a passion which bends down the faculties, and turns all the wisdom, contemplations, and operations of the soul backwards-----a passion, my dear, continued my father, addressing himself to my mother, which couples and equals wise men with fools, and makes us come out of caverns and hiding-places more like satyrs and four-footed beasts than men.
(pp. 644-645)

The uneasy coexistence of his intellectuality and sexuality is evident in the contrast Walter Shandy makes between them:

I wish, Yorick, said my father, you had read Plato; for there you would have learnt that there are two Loves-----
.....
... for of these Loves, according to Ficinus's comment upon Valesius, the one is rational -----
-----the other is natural-----
the first ancient-----without mother-----where Venus had nothing to do: the second, begotten of Jupiter and Dione-----
.....

This latter, continued he, partakes wholly of the nature of Venus.

The first, which is the golden chain let down from heaven, excites to love heroic, which comprehends in it, and excites to the desire of philosophy and truth-----the second, excites to desire, simply

(p. 587)

When Walter Shandy's two disjointed definitions are put back together one finds that there are two "Loves," one natural, or erotic, the other rational, or philosophic. Natural love was "begotten of Jupiter and Dione," but "partakes wholly of the nature of Venus," and "excites to desire, simply." On the other hand, rational love is "ancient-----without mother -----where Venus had nothing to do." It is the "golden chain let down from heaven," exciting to "love heroic" and to "the desire of philosophy and truth." From this juxtaposition it becomes apparent that Walter Shandy cannot contemplate his intellectuality, his "desire of philosophy and truth" but in contrast with erotic love. The discomfort he finds in the incompatibility of these two elements of his personality becomes evident in the wholly different manner in which he describes each. While rational, so-called "Platonic," love excites "to the desire of philosophy and truth," natural, or erotic, love "excites to desire, simply," and "equals wise men with fools," making them "more like satyrs and four-footed beasts than men."

Somehow this internal conflict between Walter Shandy's intellect and his sexuality must be resolved. Obviously, his intellect wins out. However, if one accepts the proposition that energy, like matter, cannot be destroyed, the same must be true of sexual energy, and the total eradication of Walter Shandy's sexuality becomes impossible. But energy, indestructible though it may be, can be deflected in its course, and while eradication of Walter Shandy's sexual energy may be impossible, deflection of it is not, and the intensity of his

intellectual preoccupations may be regarded as the result of sexual sublimation.

After the deflection of the major part of his sexual energy to his intellect Walter Shandy's physical sexuality begins to decay and he nearly loses the ability to impregnate. This near inability is demonstrated by the false pregnancy Mrs. Shandy undergoes in 1717, the year before Tristram's birth (p. 41). During the return journey from London where his wife was to have been confined, Walter Shandy expresses his doubts of his own sexual capacities: "'Certainly,' he would say to himself, over and over again, 'the woman could not be deceived herself; --- if she could, --- what weakness!'" (p. 42). The word "weakness" insinuates itself into his brain and leads him a "thorny dance" upon "how many kinds of weaknesses there were---that there was such a thing as weakness of the body, --- as well as weakness of the mind --- and then he would do nothing but syllogize within himself for a stage or two together, How far the cause of all these vexations might, or might not, have arisen out of himself" (p. 42). The degree to which the cause of his vexations arose from within Walter Shandy becomes clear when one remembers that the usual cause of a false pregnancy is psychological and arises out of a fervent desire for motherhood.³ As Walter Shandy begins to realize, his "weakness of the body," his difficulty in impregnation, is equally at fault with his wife's "weakness of the mind," in "deceiving" herself.

This impression of male barrenness is heightened by the mocking fertility of nature. According to Tristram, what vexed his father most about their "Tom Fool's errand" to London was the "provoking time of year," which "was towards the end of September, when his wall fruit, and greengages especially, in which he was very curious, were just ready for pulling" (p. 41). This juxtaposition of harvest time with the Shandys' futile journey gives Walter Shandy's self-doubt much of its poignant significance. The harvest time would have been a most propitious time to be born but Mrs. Shandy brings forth no child. Tristram is to be born in November, a month past the fruitful time of harvest when the earth itself is growing barren. This reflects on both Tristram and his father, foreshadowing the hints given of the adult Tristram's impotence and Walter Shandy's lamentation that his son is a "child of decrepitude ... produced into being in the decline of [his] father's days---when the powers of his imagination and of his body were waxing feeble" (p. 296).

As Walter Shandy observes, the "powers of his imagination," as well as those of his body, are "waxing feeble"; and it is this enfeeblement of the "imagination" that causes him to lose the emotional satisfaction normally gotten from the sexual act. This emotional atrophy takes the form of the sexual indifference and mechanization shown in the following passage. Tristram states that his father was a "most regular man in every thing he did," (p. 8) that it was his custom to wind the clock on the first Sunday night of each month, and that:

being somewhere between fifty and sixty years of age, at the time I have been speaking of,----he had likewise gradually brought some other little family concerns to the same period, in order, as he would often say to my uncle Toby, to get them all out of the way at one time, and be no more plagued and pester'd with them the rest of the month.

(p. 8)

As may be seen in the following passage, by the time of Tristram's birth, the pleasure Walter Shandy derives from the sexual act is minimal. Only the act's procreative function remains, and that function itself is made to serve a "principle":

-----Brother Shandy, answer'd my uncle Toby, looking wistfully in his face,----you are much mistaken in this point;----for you do increase my pleasure very much, in begetting children for the Shandy family at your time of life.--
--But, by that, Sir, quoth Dr. Slop, Mr. Shandy increases his own.-----Not a jot, quoth my father.

CHAP. XIII.

My brother does it, quoth my uncle Toby, out of principle. -----In a family-way, I suppose, quoth Dr. Slop.-----Pshaw! -----said my father, ----- 'tis not worth talking of. (pp. 115-116)

The "wistful" expression that comes over Toby Shandy's face as he tells of his pleasure at his brother's "begetting children for the Shandy family" assumes a melancholy significance when one learns that Uncle Toby is both castrated and a virgin, and that he has no hope whatsoever of begetting these children himself.

Evidence of Uncle Toby's castration may be found in the detailed description of the wound he suffered in the groin at the siege of Namur (p. 97). On being shown this description, Dr. Richard Cilley of the Student Health Center, College of William and Mary, was of the opinion that Uncle Toby suffered

from a chronic infection of the bone marrow, and that the wound, as described, may well have been a total castration. At the very least, it would have made sexual activity extremely painful, and probably impossible.⁴ The probability that Toby's wounding resulted in total castration is increased by the fact that the stone wounding him struck "full upon" (p. 67) his groin and by the suggestion of emasculation found within Tristram's comparison of his uncle's modesty as rising "to such a height in him, as almost to equal ... even the modesty of a woman" (p. 66).⁵

The severity of Uncle Toby's sexual limitations is increased by the evidence of his virginity found in the following passage. This passage suggests that not only has Uncle Toby been incapable of performing the sexual act since his wounding at Namur, but that prior to it, he had never performed it, that he was a virgin and destined to remain one:

To think, said my father, of a man living to your age, brother, and knowing so little about women! ----I know nothing at all about them,----replied my uncle Toby; and I think ... that the shock I received ... in my affair with widow Wadman ... has given me just cause to say, That I neither know, nor pretend to know, any thing about 'em, or their concerns either. ----Methinks, brother, replied my father, you might, at least, know so much as the right end of a woman from the wrong.

It is said in Aristotle's Master-Piece, "That when a man doth think of any thing which is past, ----he looketh down upon the ground; ----but that when he thinketh of something which is to come, he looketh up towards the heavens."

My uncle Toby, I suppose, thought of neither, ----for he look'd horizontally.----Right end, ----quoth my uncle Toby, muttering the two words low to himself, and fixing his two eyes insensibly as he muttered them, upon a small crevice, form'd

by a bad joint in the chimney-piece.-----
 Right end of a woman!----I declare, quoth my
 uncle, I know no more which it is, than the man
 in the moon ... (pp. 101-102)

In giving the impression of neither looking forward to a sexual experience to come, nor back to one in the past, Uncle Toby enforces the evidence both of his castration and of his virginity. Sterne furthers this point by drawing attention to the crevice "formed by a bad joint in the chimney-piece," which, in the light of Sterne's characteristic double entendre, may be seen as a dual sexual image suggesting both the feminine "covered way" (p. 100) and Toby's wound upon the groin and its attendant "bad joint," that of the crushed os pubis and os ilium (p. 79).

Toby's castration could not have left his psyche unmarked, and its deepest scar shows itself as Toby's "most extreme and unparalled modesty of nature" (p. 66). This modesty is so obviously the outcome of his sexual disablement that Sterne allows even the usually oblivious Tristram to discern how far from inherent it was in his uncle's character:

[Uncle Toby was possessed of] ---a most extreme and unparalled modesty of nature;----though I correct the word nature, for this reason, that I may not prejudge a point which must shortly come to a hearing; and that is, Whether this modesty of his was natural or acquired.
 (p. 66)

Tristram is so certain of the sexual origin of his uncle's modesty that he indulges, along with the reader, in speculation over how one might normally expect it to have been acquired. Then he reveals its true origin. This origin is shocking as

Tristram knows, and when he finally thrusts it upon the reader it is with fully as much éclat as the original shot:

[This modesty was not in regard] to words ... but to things---and this kind of modesty so possessed him,
 a [This modesty was not in regard] to words ...
 equal ... even the modesty of a woman ...

You will imagine, Madam, that my uncle Toby had contracted all this from the very source,---that he had spent a great part of his time in converse with your sex ...

I wish I could say so,---for unless it was with his sister-in-law ... my uncle Toby scarce exchanged three words with the sex in as many years, --- no, he got it, Madam, by a blow. ----A blow!---- Yes, Madam, it was owing to a blow from a stone, broke off by a ball from the parapet of a horn-work at the siege of Namur, which struck full upon my uncle Toby's groin.
 (pp. 66-67)

No, Uncle Toby has not "contracted" his modesty from interaction with women. Indeed, his avoidance of the sex is conspicuous. In the light of this, and Sterne's subsequent introduction of the affair of Aunt Dinah, Tristram's great-aunt who was "married and got with child by the coachman" (p. 65), Toby's outstanding modesty is seen to be less "cleanliness of mind and fancy," than acute sexual embarrassment. Aunt Dinah was the sole exception to Tristram's observation that the female Shandys "had no [originality of] character at all" (p. 65). Her originality consisted of promiscuity and undeniable fertility. This so embarrassed Uncle Toby that he could not "hear the the affair of my aunt Dinah touch'd upon, but with the greatest emotion.----The least hint of it was enough to make the blood fly into his face" (p. 67).

Another facet of Toby's sexual embarrassment, his sensitivity to conception and childbearing, is revealed in the following

passage:

Of all the riddles of a married life, said my father ... there is not one that has more intricacies in it than this --- that from the very moment the mistress of the house is brought to bed, every female in it ... becomes an inch taller for it; and give themselves more airs upon that single inch, than all their other inches put together.

I think rather, replied my uncle Toby, that 'tis we who sink an inch lower. ----If I meet but a woman with child-----I do it ... (p. 284)

Is Uncle Toby's sensitivity toward the affair of Aunt Dinah only in respect to the Shandy family honor (p. 69), as he protests? Is his feeling of humility when confronted by a pregnant woman simply his compassion for women and the "heavy tax" (p. 284) childbearing imposes upon them? Or do these two attitudes result from Toby's consciousness of his own sexual incapacity? His abrupt change of subject in the following passage seems to support the last:

----I know not, quoth [my father], what we have left to give up, in lieu of who shall bring our children into the world, --- unless that --- of who shall beget them. ---One would almost give up any thing, replied Dr. Slop. ---I beg your pardon,---answered my uncle Toby. ---Sir, replied Dr. Slop, it would astonish you to know what Improvements we have made of late years in all branches of obstetrical knowledge, but particularly in ... the ... extraction of the foetus ---- which has received such lights that ... I declare I wonder how the world has--- I wish, quoth my uncle Toby, you had seen what prodigious armies we had in Flanders. (p. 144)

In this passage Uncle Toby shows a distinct sensitivity to the suggestion that one voluntarily give up what he has lost in war, the capacity of begetting children. His second interruption

reveals where that thought has taken him, back to the memory and place of his sexual disablement.

However, Toby's sexual embarrassment is not the only mark his castration has left on his character. While attempting to adjust to his disablement, Toby found his raison d'être, his hobby horse. Like Walter Shandy's many theories and systems, Uncle Toby's hobby horse has its genesis in the deflection of sexual energy to an intellectual level, and may be viewed as an hermaphroditic conception, begotten on himself by himself, carried and brought forth. However, unlike Walter Shandy's, Uncle Toby's deflection is complete, and the lone offspring of this massive deflection achieves a level of physical reality and autonomy never reached by Walter Shandy's "hobbyhorsical" theories and systems.

Uncle Toby's hobby horse, his military preoccupations and miniature fortifications, is the result of his attempt to reduce the military world in which he suffered his sexual disablement to a compass within his dominion and control. In turn, this reduction allows him to deal with the shock and horror of his loss of manhood on a bearable level. The conception of Uncle Toby's hobby horse is caused by his inability to make his constant visitors understand exactly how and where at Namur he received his wound. As Tristram states, "his life was put in jeopardy by words" (p. 87). The words in question are military terms such as "scarp," "counterscarp," "glacis," and "half-moon," all representing constructions utilized in fortification. The physical jeopardy in which Uncle Toby's life was placed on the actual structures these terms describe is parallel to the psychological

jeopardy in which his life was placed by his inability to handle the symbols of these structures. Exasperated, Toby decides to meet his problem head-on, believing that should he get "a large map of the fortifications of the town and citadel of Namur, with its environs, it might be a means of giving him ease" (p. 83). He is confident that once he has his map he will be able to "stick a pin upon the identical spot of ground where he was standing in when the stone struck him" (p. 84). The act of sticking the pin into the map, itself a wounding, is a sexual image doubly recalling where Toby received his own wound. Uncle Toby's hobby horse was conceived when he acquired his map and the first part of the hobby's gestation is occupied by his dilligent study of it, for in Toby's own mind, his recovery depended upon mastering the circumstances of his wounding. Only by making himself "so far master of his subject as to be able to talk upon it without emotion," (p. 87) can he overcome the psychological trauma of his loss of manhood. Only by overcoming this psychological trauma can he achieve the ease of mind necessary to his recovery from the corresponding physical trauma. Fortunately, Tristram tells us, he was well on his way toward this mastery "before he was two full months gone" (p. 88).

One of Toby's occupations during the gestation of his hobby horse, his study of projectiles, may be viewed as an attempt at dealing with the sexual act itself. The passages referring to this study are sprinkled with sexually suggestive expressions such as his blood's being set afire by "long friction and incubition," (p. 88). "heat and impatience," (p. 88) and the love-lorn image of his sitting up "whole nights baking [his] blood with

hectic watchings" (p. 90). Finally Toby decides he can understand nothing of projectiles and breaks off their study "in a kind of huff" (p. 91). Subsequently, when he finds he can understand nothing of women and their attitude toward sex, he breaks off his courtship of Mrs. Wadman in an identical huff. Thus the motion of projectiles and the sexual act are related. It was by means of a projectile, a ball striking off a stone, that Toby received his wound in the groin; it is because of this wound that he ends his "affair" with Mrs. Wadman. His study of projectiles is symbolic of his attempt at dealing with his physical disability. As this is irreparable, he can do no better than give it up, as he will Mrs. Wadman.

While Uncle Toby studied projectiles his brain child continued to grow, and grow to a size too great for the womb. Its full reckoning has come, and its birth seems as fraught with small accidents and vexations as that of Tristram is to be:

The table in my uncle Toby's room, and at which, the night before this change happened, he was sitting with his maps, &c. about him,---being somewhat of the smallest, for that infinity of great and small instruments of knowledge which usually lay crowded upon it:-----he had the accident, in reaching over for his tobacco-box, to throw down his compasses, and in stooping to take the compasses up, with his sleeve he threw down his case of instruments and snuffers;----and as the dice took a run against him, in his endeavouring to catch the snuffers in falling,---he thrust Monsieur Blondel off the table and Count de Pagan o-top of him.
(pp. 93-94)

Corporal Trim acts as midwife to the hobby horse, midwife to the conception of an impotent man:

Your Honour understands these matters, replied Corporal Trim, better than any officer in his Majesty's service;---but would your Honour please to let the

bespeaking of the table alone, and let us but go into the country, I would work under your Honour's directions like a horse, and make fortifications for you something like a tansy, with all their batteries, saps, ditches, and palisadoes, that it should be worth all the world's riding twenty miles to go and see it. (p. 97)

The birth of the hobby horse is the most significant milestone on Toby's road to recovery --- simultaneously as it is moved from the table to the bowling green, Toby breaks the confinement of his brother's London house and flies up to his own house next to Shandy Hall in Yorkshire. His hobby horse is ready to take its place as Toby's substitute for the female companionship he is never to enjoy, and he heads for Yorkshire afire with "heat and expectation" much as he might to a beloved mistress (p. 98). He is faithful --- only when his hobby fails him after the demolition of Dunkirk will he forsake it to try his hand at the real thing, his courtship of Mrs. Wadman. Apparently, after the break with Mrs. Wadman he returns to it. By the time Tristram is born Toby and his hobby horse are again on the very best of terms. ⁶

In the fourth chapter of the first volume Tristram announces his intention of beginning the history of his life and opinions ab Ovo, or from the egg (p. 7). There is a good reason for this, for as Walter Shandy is to remark, whilst wiping away a tear, "My Tristram's misfortunes began nine months before he ever came into the world" (p. 7 - Sterne's italics). Walter Shandy did well to weep, for the role his sexual incompetence plays in the near ruination of his son also begins ab Ovo.

In the following passage Tristram takes note of what may be passed from father to son, and how a thing's beginning may determine its whole course:

----Believe me, good folks, this is not so inconsiderable a thing as many of you may think it; --- you have all, I dare say, heard of the animal spirits, as how they are transfused from father to son, &c &c. ---- and a great deal to that purpose; ---Well, you may take my word, that nine parts in ten of a man's sense or his nonsense, his successes and miscarriages in this world depend upon their motions and activity, and the different tracks and trains you put them into, so that when they are once set a-goin, whether right or wrong, 'tis not a halfpenny matter ...
(p. 4)

The immediate cause of Tristram's first misfortune and the first attempt his father's sexual incompetence makes on his life and manhood, is a question:

Pray, my dear, quoth my mother, have you not forgot to wind up the clock? -----Good G---! cried my father, making an exclamation, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same time.-----Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question? Pray, what was your father saying? ----- Nothing.
(p. 5)

Because of this interruption Walter Shandy is frustrated, and Tristram's homunculus comes close to having a nervous breakdown. What, pray tell, is an homunculus?

The HOMUNCULUS, Sir, in how-ever low and ludicrous a light he may appear, in this age of levity, to the eye of folly or prejudice: ---to the eye of reason in scientifick research, he stands confess'd ---a BEING guarded and circumscribed with rights: --- The minutest philosophers ... shew us incontestably, That the HOMUNCULUS is created by the same hand,---engender'd in the same course of nature,---endowed with the same loco-motive powers and faculties with us: --- That he consists, as we do, of skin, hair,

fat, flesh, veins, arteries, ligaments, nerves, cartilages, bones, marrow, brains, glands, genitals, humours, and articulations;---is a Being of as much activity,---and, in all senses of the word, as much and as truly our fellow-creature as my Lord Chancellor of England. ---He may be benefited, he may be injured, ---he may obtain redress;---in a word he has all the claims and rights of humanity, which Tully, Puffendorff, or the best *éthick* writers allow to arise out of that state and relation.

(pp. 5-6)

The homunculus, so disconcerted by Walter Shandy's annoyance, is an entire microscopic human being. It is the adult Tristram diminished to his smallest possible compass, one cell of his father's sperm. The whole of his being is contained within that one engendering cell. Thus any damage done to the homunculus is done to the man. In the following passage, Walter Shandy's annoyance shocks Tristram's homunculus and sets the seal upon his future eccentricity:

Now, dear Sir, what if any accident had befallen him in his way alone?---or that, thro' terror of it, natural to so young a traveller, my little gentleman had got to his journey's end miserably spent;---his muscular strength and virility worn down to a thread; ---his own animal spirits ruffled beyond description, ---and that in this sad disorder'd state of nerves, he had laid down a prey to sudden starts, or a series of melancholy dreams and fancies for nine long, long months together. ---I tremble to think what a foundation had been laid for a thousand weaknesses both of body and mind, which no skill of the physician or the philosopher could ever afterwards have set thoroughly to rights.

(p. 6)

By the time Tristram's homunculus reaches his journey's end his "muscular strength and virility" are "worn down to a thread" and Tristram is already threatened with a "thousand weaknesses both of body and mind." Already his strength and virility have been sapped.

Mrs. Shandy's question was the immediate cause, but not the primary factor in the frazzling of the homunculus and the initial assault on Tristram's life and manhood. That is to be found in the grudging, mechanical way Walter Shandy goes about performing his marital duties, on the first Sunday night of each month after winding the clock. He is so regular in these actions that Tristram's mother "could never hear said clock wound up, --- but the thoughts of some other things unavoidably popp'd into her head, & vice versa" (p. 9). It is this vice versa which prompts Mrs. Shandy's question, and she is less to blame for her conditioning than what caused it, her husband's loss of sexual drive. Had the lovemaking of Tristram's parents been spontaneous and absorbing it is doubtful whether the question would have been asked, and had it been, it is even more doubtful Walter Shandy would have taken enough notice of it to become annoyed. Walter Shandy, any genuine virility gone, "services" his wife "out of principle," (p. 116) much as he "was obliged to keep a Bull for the service of the Parish" (p. 646). The very act of winding the clock as a prelude to sexual union is symbolic of the atmosphere of mechanism and sterility in which Tristram is conceived.

Now that the hapless homuncular Tristram has staggered to his journey's end, it is time to leave the poor creature to gestate in peace, and turn our attention to another gestation, a dire plot growing in the womb of Walter Shandy's speculative imagination. As Arthur Cash observes, "Tristram Shandy was as much a product of his father's intellect as of his loins. No father was ever less successful." ⁷ The part Walter's loins play is

is finished with Tristram's conception; his mechanization of the sexual act has already frazzled Tristram's homunculus beyond hope. Now, as he broods over how his child should best be brought into the world, his intellect gets its turn.

The first threat his father's intellect poses to Tristram is Walter Shandy's determination to call in a professional man-midwife, or "scientific operator" instead of the parish midwife to deliver his son:

For all these reasons, private and publick, put together, --- my father was for having the man-midwife by all means,---my mother by no means. My father begg'd and intreated, she would for once recede from her prerogative in this matter and suffer him to choose for her;---my mother, on the contrary, insisted upon her privilege in this matter, to choose for herself,---and have no mortal's help but the old woman's. ... In a word, my mother was to have the old woman,---and the operator was to have licence to drink a bottle of wine with my father and my uncle Toby Shandy in the back parlour, ---for which he was to be paid five guineas.

(p. 48)

Walter Shandy's "publick" reason for insisting on the man-midwife is straightforward enough; since he has been obdurate in refusing to allow his wife to be confined in London, the world would blame him for any mischance that might occur during the birth (p. 45). However, his "private" reasons are more complex. He has concluded, after studying various learned authorities, that the seat of human reason is the cerebellum (p. 148). He has also learned that in childbirth, "by force of the woman's efforts, which in strong labour-pains, was equal, upon an average, to a weight of 470 pounds averdupoise acting perpendicularly upon it," the child's head "was compressed and moulded

into the shape of an oblong conical piece of dough, such as a pastry cook generally rolls up in order to make a pye of" (p. 150). Moreover, he has learned that this compression, in a normal head first presentation, "necessarily squeez'd and propell'd the cerebrum towards the cerebellum, which was the immediate seat of the understanding" (p. 151). Upon learning this, Walter Shandy is outraged, shocked, beside himself: "Angels and ministers of grace defend us," he cries, "Can any soul withstand this shock" (p. 151). However, when the feet present it is a different story:

But when my father read on, and was let into the secret, that when a child was turn'd topsy-turvy, which was easy for an operator to do, and was extracted by the feet;---that instead of the cerebrum being propell'd towards the cerebellum, the cerebellum, on the contrary, was propell'd simply towards the cerebrum where it could do no manner of hurt: ---By heavens! cried he, the world is in a conspiracy to drive out what little wit God has given us,---and the professors of the obstetric art are listed into the same conspiracy.----What is it to me which end of my son comes foremost into the world, provided all goes right after, and his cerebellum escapes uncrushed? (p. 151)

Though Mrs. Shandy's "old woman," the parish midwife, had "brought every mother's son of [the parish] into the world without any one slip or accident which could fairly be laid to her account," (p. 45) Walter Shandy must hire a professional "scientific operator" to instigate the breech birth he desires. Which brings us to Dr. Slop:

Of all men in the world, Dr. Slop was the fittest for my father's purpose;----for though his new-invented forceps was the armour he had proved, and what he maintained, to be the safest instrument of deliverance,----yet, it seems he had scattered a word or two in his book,

in favour of the very thing which ran in my father's fancy;---tho' not with a view to the soul's good in extracting by the feet, as was my father's system, ----but for reasons merely obstetrical. (pp. 153-154)

To understand how far from reality Walter Shandy's irresponsible theorizing has taken him, and how gravely it has imperiled the life of his son, it is necessary to know something about the man-midwife John Burton, and how he came to be Sterne's original for Dr. Slop.

Laurence Sterne and his wife had little luck with their children. The births of three children to the Sternes are documented, that of Lydia, who lived for one day, in October 1745; that of the second Lydia, who lived to adulthood, in December 1747; and that of a stillborn child sometime in the spring of 1751. However, there may have been more. Richard Greenwood, Sterne's servant at the vicarage in Sutton, says of Mrs. Sterne that she "'brought Sterne several children,'" ⁸ referring to a time prior to the birth of the first Lydia in 1745. He also speaks of a son born to the couple who "'lived 3 weeks.'" According to Greenwood, Sterne "'was inconsolable'" on the death of this son, and "'took to his chamber, & would not leave it of a week.'" ⁹

This tragic domestic situation led Sterne to make a study of obstetrics, and again brought to his attention the man-midwife John Burton with whom he had clashed, politically, some ten years before. ¹⁰ In a letter dating from the time Elizabeth Sterne was carrying the second Lydia, Sterne writes of his wife as being "'under an apparent Necessity of a Man mid-wife to attend her.'" ¹¹ In Sterne's day calling in a physician, or man-midwife,

to attend a confinement was not even considered unless the woman's condition was serious. It is probable Sterne began to study obstetrical texts at this time. It is more than probable he returned to this study after the dead child's birth in 1751. This same year Dr. John Burton's Essay toward a Complete New System of Midwifry was published, followed two years later by his Letter to William Smellie, M.D.¹² Sterne took virtually all the obstetrical information found in Tristram Shandy from these two publications.¹³

Dr. John Burton, whose professional irresponsibility Sterne was to immortalize in his portrayal of Dr. Slop, was a smug incompetent "unreasonably hostile toward the discoveries of his contemporaries."¹⁴ He was particularly hostile towards William Smellie, a respected physician and one of the founders of modern obstetrics. This professional hostility led him to rush his unfinished Essay to the printers in anticipation of William Smellie's soon to appear Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Midwifery.¹⁵ In the "Appendix" to this Essay, Burton recommends a new type of forceps of his own invention, "'better than any yet contrived.'"¹⁶ These forceps, "contrived" by Burton in unreasonable spite at the favorable reception accorded his rival's, proved a ludicrous failure.

This professional fiasco only intensified Burton's jealousy. So overwhelming did it become that in his Letter to William Smellie, M.D., a virulent attack on Smellie's Treatise, he advocates the extraction of the child feet first in order to discount the usefulness of Smellie's forceps. He justifies his advocacy of this very dangerous style of delivery on the grounds

that the child's cerebellum may be better preserved. In fact, the contrary is the case. The child's cerebellum is put in very grave danger by a breech birth.¹⁷

Petty professional jealousies were the "grounds merely obstetrical" on which the original of Slop, John Burton, advocated turning the child and deliberately instigating a breech birth. Heinous professional irresponsibility was the source of the theory that gulls Walter Shandy into jeopardizing the life of his son. Had Slop been able to manage a breech birth in line with Walter Shandy's specifications, Tristram might have suffered far worse than a flattened nose. His cerebellum might indeed have been crushed; he might have died. Probably the only thing which saves him is the precipitant manner of his birth which foils his father's scheme by not allowing Dr. Slop time to turn him feet first.

Another grim instance of Walter Shandy's marital indifference, and the extent to which theorizing has clouded his judgment, is his earlier hope that his wife might allow their child to be delivered by Caesarian section (p. 153). Luckily, Mrs. Shandy turned "as pale as ashes at the very mention of it," (p. 153) with reason. In Sterne's time the operation was invariably fatal to the mother and performed only as a final, despairing gesture on the off-chance it might save a woman already dying.¹⁸

Walter Shandy's persistent theorizing has determined him upon an unnatural delivery for his son and set the obstetrical archvillain Dr. Slop to lurking in the wings. Now it is time to raise the curtain on the central obstetrical drama of Tristram Shandy, the catastrophic birth of its hero. However, this drama

will not be enacted above stairs, for as Elgin Mellown observes, Sterne "was too much the gentleman and artist to intrude upon Mrs. Shandy." ¹⁹ Instead, our hero will meet his doom symbolically in a muddy lane and in the Shandy parlor. Nor will he meet this doom in his own proper person, for Sterne, with an exquisite sense of poetic justice, has thoughtfully provided him with a stand-in in the person of Dr. Slop. ²⁰ Thus, in order to see how all Walter Shandy's careful scheming falls out, it is necessary to pay close attention to the actions of Dr. Slop and the accidents which befall him prior to his delivery of Tristram.

To see just how well Sterne has adapted Dr. Slop to his role as Tristram's proxy one needs to contrast his appearance with that of his historical prototype, John Burton. Though Dr. Slop and John Burton were twin brothers in their lack of professional competence, in person they were hardly identical. Dr. Burton was far from the rotund dwarf Sterne describes. The account of a contemporary witness, in 1746, suggests Burton was of a good personal appearance and may have been something of a dandy. This witness described Dr. Burton as "'a tall Well sett Gentlemⁿ in a light Colored Coat in Boots with a Whip under his arm'". ²¹ Burton's representative, Dr. Slop, appears on the scene as follows:

Imagine to yourself a little, squat, uncourtly figure of a Doctor Slop, of about four feet and a half perpendicular height, with a breadth of back and a sesquipedality of belly, which might have done honour to a serjeant in the horseguards. (p. 104)

Sterne's alteration of so easily verifiable a particular as Burton's personal appearance suggests that Sterne's abuse of Burton is aimed at the "scientifik operator" not the man. Had personal abuse been intended such a disparity between the representation and the fact would have defeated its own purpose. ²²

While Sterne's misrepresentation of Burton's personal appearance contributes much to his general obstetrical satire, the particular form this misrepresentation takes is essential to his presentation of Slop as a surrogate Tristram. Had ridicule of quack obstetricians been Sterne's only intent, the spindery attenuation of a Uriah Heep would have served him equally well; instead Sterne chooses to describe Slop in terms that suggest the rotundity of an infant, very broad and deep in proportion to his length. This infantilism of Slop allows him to slip easily into the role of Tristram, remain believable, and illustrate by parallel symbolism the three crucial circumstances of Tristram's birth: his prematurity, the difficulty of his mother's confinement, and the violence of his entry into the world.

Sterne furthers his representation of Dr. Slop as Tristram by his emphasis on the precipitant arrivals of both. Slop's arrival in the Shandy parlor is "sudden and unexpected" (p. 110); Tristram himself is premature. Tristram has proven himself to have been conceived "between the first Sunday and the first Monday in the month of March" (p. 8). He was born, appropriately enough, on Guy Fawkes Day, "the fifth day of November, 1718 ... as near nine kalendar months [later] as any husband could in reason

have expected" (p. 9). Either Tristram can't count or Sterne is indulging in contraries. At the most generous estimate Tristram's gestation takes no more than a very few days over eight months. Sterne's care in fixing both dates, and in emphasizing the normal time of gestation, invites the reader to count up the months on eight fingers and prepares him for the "sudden and unexpected" arrivals of both Tristram and Dr. Slop. Sterne again emphasizes this prematurity, by contradiction, when he has Walter Shandy tell Dr. Slop that Mrs. Shandy "was at her full reckoning" a week before even eight months had been accomplished (p. 108). The surprising arrival of Tristram-Slop is underlined by the remark that Slop lives "but poor eight miles from Shandy-Hall" (p. 103). Sterne's use of "poor" and "eight" is significant; the number serves to recall the months of Mrs. Shandy's pregnancy, and the adjective its scant duration. "Poor" is particularly striking, for, though in context it also serves to illustrate Sterne's solipsistic view of time, in its literal, spatial context it is blatantly inappropriate. In Sterne's time a frantic, sixteen mile gallop over a miry road to fetch and return with a doctor was no joke.

Slop is dressed out as Tristram. It remains to be seen what he can make of the part. Not only is the real Tristram premature, his mother's labor is difficult, and his birth is to be made abrupt and violent by the intervention of Slop and his forceps. In the upcoming encounter, Dr. Slop, as surrogate, experiences at least some of the trauma to which he, as Walter Shandy's agent, will subject Tristram:

Imagine such a one,---for such, I say, were the outlines of Dr. Slop's figure, coming slowly along, foot by foot, waddling thro' the dirt upon the vertebrae of a little diminutive pony, of a pretty colour; ---but of strength, --- alack! --- scarce able to have made an amble of it, under such a fardel, had the roads been in an ambling condition. ---They were not. --- Imagine to yourself, Obadiah, mounted upon a strong monster of a coach-horse, prick'd into a full gallop, and making all practicable speed the adverse way.

Had Dr. Slop beheld Obadiah a mile off, posting in a narrow lane directly towards him, at that monstrous rate, --- splashing and plunging like a devil thro' thick and thin, as he approach'd, would not such a phaenomenon ... have been a subject of juster apprehension to Dr. Slop than the worst of Whiston's comets? ... What then do you think must the terror and hydrophobia of Dr. Slop have been, when you read ... that he was advancing thus warily along towards Shandy-Hall, and had approach'd to within sixty yards of a sudden turn, made by an acute angle of the garden wall, --- and in the dirtiest part of a dirty lane,---when Obadiah and his coach-horse turn'd the corner, rapid, furious,----pop,----full upon him! ----Nothing, I think, in nature, can be supposed more terrible, than such a Rencounter,----so imprompt! so ill prepared to stand the shock of it as Dr. Slop was!
(pp. 105-106)

The violent "rencounter" of Slop and Obadiah prefigures the botched delivery of Tristram. Slop's pony, "scarce able to have made an amble of it, under such a fardel," may be seen to represent a woman weakening in a difficult confinement. The narrow lane suggests the birth canal, too narrow for the child, and the phrase "posting along," the earlier stages of labor when Slop more properly should have arrived. The imminent collision of Slop with Obadiah on his monstrous coach-horse prefigures the intervention of Slop and his clumsy forceps to deliver Tristram who is also at an awkward angle at a crucial stage of labor.

The figure Slop presents upon his arrival in the Shandy parlor is a further instance of his role as surrogate Tristram:

- ----He stood like Hamlet's ghost, motionless and speechless, for a full minute and a half, at the parlour door (Obadiah still holding his hand) with all the majesty of mud. His hinder parts, upon which he had received his fall, totally besmear'd, ----and in every other part of him, blotched over in such a manner with Obadiah's explosion, that you would have sworn ... that every grain of it had taken effect. (p. 107)

Slop's "majesty of mud," gotten by falling off his pony, "diagonally, something in the stile and manner of a pack of wool," (p. 106) (something in the style and manner of a mare dropping her foal), makes an effective correspondent to the bloodily besmeared appearance of a newly born and unwashed child. Like a newborn, Slop is promptly "washed --- rubb'd down," --- comforted, "condoled with," crowed over, "felicitated," and wrapped in swaddling clothes, in this case a pair of Obadiah's slippers (p. 109).

After his reentry into the Shandy parlor Slop's first role, as Tristram's surrogate, is finished and his second, as Walter Shandy's agent and executor of his obstetrical theories, is due to begin. However, Dr. Slop has left his props behind:

Thou hast come forth unarm'd;----thou hast left thy tire tête, thy new-invented forceps,----thy crotchet,----thy squirt, and all thy instruments of salvation and deliverance behind thee.-----By heaven! at this moment they are hanging up in a green bays bag, betwixt thy two pistols, at thy bed's head! (pp. 109-110)

An examination of the peculiar contents of Slop's bag offers the reader a frightening demonstration of how serious a threat Dr. Slop may prove to the survival of Walter Shandy's son. Well might

Tristram use the word "unarm'd" and locate the "green bays bag" between Slop's pistols. But for his beloved forceps all Slop's contraptions were, like his pistols, instruments of destruction. The tire tête was a grisly device used to crush the head of a child too large to pass; the crotchet, a hooked knife used to dismember and extract a foetus which could be gotten from the womb in no other way; and the squirt, a syringe used to baptise an unborn child with no chance of coming into the world alive.²³ Even Slop's "newly-invented forceps," if they were anything like his prototype John Burton's invention, were far from gentle. Medical historians regard Burton's contrivance as "the most odd, impractical, whimsical device ever suggested for insinuation into womankind."²⁴ Moreover, in practical application they were downright dangerous. The magnification of force between the handle and the blades was so great that the operator could have no idea just how much force the blades were exerting.²⁵ Small wonder Slop managed to crush Uncle Toby's knuckles "to a jelly" (p. 187). A similar degree of convenience and servicibility is to be found in the following account of Dr. Slop's favorite instrument:

-----Dr. Slop had lost his teeth----his favourite instrument, by extracting in a wrong direction, or by some mis-application of it, unfortunately slipping, he had formerly in a hard labour, knock'd out three of the best of them, with the handle of it ... (p. 168)

Such was the device destined to crush Tristram Shandy's nose.

Since Dr. Slop is entirely lost without his instruments, and especially his forceps, Obadiah is dispatched to fetch them. Luckily, for Tristram, some small Shandean accidents seem to work in his favor.

Having to wait for his instruments shortens the time Slop will have to turn Tristram in the womb and helps prevent the breech birth desired by Walter Shandy.

While Obadiah is off fetching his instruments, Slop is left with Uncle Toby and Walter Shandy in the parlor. During this scene the sort of influence Uncle Toby is to have on the mishaps attending his nephew's birth becomes apparent. However, to trace one form of this influence, Toby's "passive responsibility," from the beginning it is necessary to glance back at the "lying-in" article in the Shandy marriage contract. This article states that Mrs. Shandy "was to lay in, (is she chose it) in London" (p. 40). But there was one stipulation, a clause added at Uncle Toby's suggestion, that if she put her husband "to the trouble and expence of a London journey upon false cries and tokens ... she should forfeit all the right and title which the covenant gave her to the next turn" (p. 40). Thus Uncle Toby is passively responsible, in the broadest sense, for Dr. Slop's presence in the house. It is by holding his wife to the letter of Toby's clause that Walter Shandy prevents her lying-in in London, and gets a chance to try out his obstetrical theories. This passive responsibility is characteristic of Toby's part in Tristram's misfortunes. He is like a man who leaves breakables sitting on a trigger for the next unlucky passerby to knock off. Toby is responsible for the existence of the clause, but Walter for its execution.

However, Toby's influence extends beyond this sort of passive responsibility. Through his clause Toby has unwittingly furthered

his brother's schemes by giving him the chance to call in Dr. Slop, but this is the only instance of his cooperation. For the most part, Toby's influence runs counter to Walter Shandy's. In fact, he acts almost as a "double agent." His own "hobby-horsical" preoccupation acts as a foil to his brother's theorizing, while providing its own set of catastrophes. Toby's role as foil is demonstrated by Walter's protest after Toby had offered to show Dr. Slop his fortifications:

But so full is your head of these confounded works,
that tho' my wife is this moment in the pains of
labour,----and you hear her cry out, --- yet nothing
will serve you-----but to carry off the man-midwife.
(pp. 112-113)

The essence of Toby's role as Walter Shandy's foil is found in one remark made no less than four times over the course of eight chapters (Vol. II, Ch. 18 through Vol. III, Ch. 6, inclusive). The remark in question, "I wish you had seen what prodigious armies we had in Flanders," is made twice by Uncle Toby and repeated twice in derision by his brother. Each time it appears its inherent association of childbirth with violence is strengthened and the danger of the breech birth desired by Walter Shandy becomes more apparent. "Uncle Toby's Flanders Suite" opens in the following passage:

---I know not, quoth [my father], ... what we have left to give up, in lieu of who shall bring our children into the world,---unless that---of who shall beget them. ---One would almost give up any thing, replied Dr. Slop. ---- I beg your pardon,---answered my uncle Toby. --- Sir, replied Dr. Slop, it would astonish you to know what Improvements we have made of late years in all branches of obstetrical knowledge, but particularly in ... the ... extraction of

the foetus --- which has received such lights that, for my part ... I declare I wonder how the world has ---- I wish, quoth my uncle Toby, you had seen what prodigious armies we had in Flanders. (p. 144)

Uncle Toby's consciousness of his own sexual incapacity is apparent in his first interruption as he flinches at the notion that one voluntarily give up what he has lost in war, the capacity of begetting children. His subsequent change of subject is more ominous. Not only does Toby's remark carry the reader back to the place and manner of his sexual disablement, but by juxtaposition, associates Dr. Slop's favored method of delivery with all the violence of a continental war. So deeply has this discussion shocked Uncle Toby that he finds it necessary to make his remark a second time:

---"I Wish, Dr. Slop," quoth my uncle Toby (repeating his wish for Dr. Slop a second time, and with a degree of more zeal and earnestness in his manner of wishing, than he had wished it at first) ----"I wish, Dr. Slop," quoth my uncle Toby, "you had seen what prodigious armies we had in Flanders." (p. 157)

Toby's reiteration of his Flanders remark draws the reader's attention back to his abrupt change of subject and all its implications. But Toby's ominous psychological slip, or association, passes over the heads of Walter Shandy and Dr. Slop. Dr. Slop, having no idea how to take the remark, is confounded. Walter Shandy, fearing to lose the thread of "one of the most interesting disputes in the world, 'Whether the child of his prayers and endeavours should be born without a head or with one;'" (pp. 157-158) sees no time is to be lost with Uncle Toby and his armies,

and comes to the doctor's rescue:

-----What prodigious armies you had in Flanders!"
 -----Brother Toby, replied my father, taking his wig
 from off his head with his right hand, and with his
left pulling out a striped India handkerchief from
 his right coat pocket, in order to rub his head, as
 he argued the point with my uncle Toby. ----
 (p. 158)

Though Walter Shandy is entirely oblivious of the warning contained within Uncle Toby's remark, whilst exclaiming against Toby's Flemish armies he performs a reinforcing action, the removal of his handkerchief from his right hand pocket with his left hand and the removal of his wig with his right. This contortion presents a curious parallel to the awkwardness and lack of necessity of turning the child in the womb to extract by the feet. Tristram draws attention to this parallel by demonstrating that there is a far more natural way to do it, first warning us that:

----But need I tell you, Sir, that the circumstances with which every thing in this world is begirt, give every thing in this world its size and shape;---and by tightening it, or relaxing it, this way or that, make the thing to be, what it is---great---little---good---bad---indifferent or not indifferent, just as the case happens.
 (p. 158)

All things are "begirt" with "circumstances." "Circumstance" means, in Latin, to "stand about" or enclose, as within a womb. These "circumstances" may be taken to represent the muscular contractions of the womb in labor; it is by the "tightening" or "relaxing" of these circumstances that "the thing to be" is formed and marked, "great --- little --- good --- bad ... just

as the case happens." After this groundwork, Tristram shows us the right way to do it; taking the handkerchief from the right hand pocket with the right hand and removing the wig with the left, suggesting the head first extraction of the child from the womb. Sterne strengthens this parallel by having Tristram emphasize, in italics, that in the reign of Queen Anne, pockets "were cut very low down in the skirt," (p. 159) thus suggesting a positional correspondence between the open mouth of the birth canal and Walter Shandy's pocket. All this has a remarkable effect on Toby, sending him back to the spot of his wounding at Namur:

It was not an easy matter in any king's reign ... to have forced your hand diagonally, quite across your whole body, so as to gain the bottom of your opposite coat-pocket. ----In the year, one thousand seven hundred and eighteen ... it was extremely difficult; so that when my uncle Toby discovered the transverse zig-zaggery of my father's approaches towards it, it instantly brought into his mind those he had done duty in, before the gate of St. Nicholas; ----the idea of which drew off his attention so entirely from the subject in debate, that he had got his right hand to the bell to ring up Trim to go and fetch his map of Namur, and his compasses ... to measure the returning angles of the traverses of that attack,---but particularly of that one, where he received his wound upon his groin. (pp. 159-160)

Walter Shandy finally ends his contortions and takes up where he left off:

----"What prodigious armies you had in Flanders!"
 ----Brother Toby, quoth my father, I do believe thee to be as honest a man ... with as good ... a heart as ever God created;---nor is it thy fault, if all the children which have been ... begotten, come with their heads foremost into the world:----but believe me, dear Toby, the accidents which unavoidably [beset our children] after they are got forth into the world are enow,---little need is there to

expose them to unnecessary ones in their passage to it. --- Are these dangers, quoth my uncle Toby, laying his hand upon my father's knee, and looking up seriously in his face for an answer,---are these dangers greater now o' days, brother, than in times past? Brother Toby, answered my father, if a child was but fairly begot, and born alive, and healthy, and the mother did well after it,---our forefathers never looked further. ----My uncle Toby instantly withdrew his hand from off my father's knee, reclined his body gently back in his chair, raised his head till he could just see the cornish of the room, and then directing the buccinatory muscles along his cheeks, and the orbicular muscles around his lips to do their duty---he whistled Lillabullero. (pp. 163-164)

The unconscious irony of Walter Shandy's concern to prevent "unnecessary accidents" in his son's passage into the world becomes well nigh tragic in the light of what we have learned of the danger of the breech birth he desires and of the professional irresponsibility of men such as Dr. Slop. Walter Shandy's love of esoterica has led him so far into Slop's specious maze that the point of Toby's gentle, "commonsensical" caveat is entirely deflected. Uncle Toby, nonplussed, and probably wishing for nothing better than for his nephew to be "born alive, and healthy," and for his sister-in-law to do "well after it," settles back and retreats into "Lillabullero."

While Uncle Toby whistles "Lillabullero" the groundwork is being laid for the second symbolic enactment of the birth of Tristram Shandy, the "delivery" of Slop's instruments from his green baize bag. In the first enactment we saw Slop, as surrogate Tristram unhorsed and given a dose of his own medicine by Obadiah. In this second enactment, the "delivery" of the instruments, we will see Slop the scientific operator at last remounted, not on his diminutive pony, but on his hobby

horse. We will also see that he can gallop with the best of them.

To see this second enactment from the beginning we must travel eight miles to Slop's house where the curtain is rising on a skit entitled "The Constriction of the Green Bays Bag";

When Dr. Slop's maid delivered the green bays bag ... to Obadiah, she very sensibly exhorted him to put his head and one arm through the strings, and ride with it slung across his body ... However, as this, in some measure, unguarded the mouth of the bag, lest any thing should bolt out in galloping back at the speed Obadiah threatened, they consulted to take it off again; and in the great care and caution of their hearts, they had taken two strings and tied them close (pursing up the mouth of the bag first) with half a dozen hard knots, each of which, Obadiah, to make all safe, had twitched and drawn together with all the strength of his body. (p. 165)

As if this gordian entanglement were not enough, Obadiah, on his return journey, finding himself unable to whistle over the jingling of the instruments, takes his hatband and constricts the bag still further, "as you would cord a trunk" (p. 166). After this operation is completed, the bag is so bound and knotted that its content is fully as inaccessible as that of Mrs. Shandy's womb:

I think in my conscience, that had NATURE been in one of her nimble moods, and in humour for such a contest ---and she and Dr. Slop both fairly started together, ----there is no man living ... who would have had the least doubt remaining in his mind----which of the two would have carried off the prize. My mother, madam, had been delivered sooner than the green bag infallibly---at least by twenty knots. (p. 166)

When we return to Shandy Hall we find Obadiah has somehow preceded us and deposited Slop's bag in the parlor. It has lain there unnoticed for some time:

Great wits jump: for the moment Dr. Slop cast his eyes upon his bag (which he had not done till the dispute with my uncle Toby about midwifery put him in mind of it)----the very same thought occurred. -----'Tis God's mercy, quoth he, (to himself) that Mrs. Shandy has had so bad a time of it,-----else she might have been brought to bed seven times told, before one half of these knots could have got untied. ----But here, you must distinguish---the thought floated only in Dr. Slop's mind, without sail or ballast to it, as a simple proposition; millions of which ... are every day swimming quietly in ... the thin juice of a man's understanding, without being carried backwards or forwards, till some little gusts of passion or interest drive them to one side.

A sudden trampling in the room above, near my mother's bed, did the proposition the very service I am speaking of. By all that's unfortunate, quoth Dr. Slop, unless I make haste, the thing will actually befall me as it is. (p. 167)

This passage gives the reader a clear demonstration of Dr. Slop's "hobbyhorsical" irresponsibility. His love of obstetrical theory and paraphernalia has led him as far from reality as Walter Shandy has been led by his love of the esoteric. During Slop's obstetrical dispute with Uncle Toby, Mrs. Shandy has gone entirely unnoticed, proving Dr. Slop to be a man who would rather gloat over recent improvements in obstetrical technique (p. 144) than attend a living woman's confinement. When his mind finally does revert to the practical aspects of midwifery, his desire to employ his instruments is obviously greater than his concern for the successful delivery of Mrs. Shandy. Even then the thought floats through his mind but casually, "without sail or ballast to it," until a "sudden trampling in the room above" forcibly

reminds him of why he is in the house. Slop is panicked by the thought that he might have to rely solely on his own professional skill and perform the delivery without the support of his instruments. He signals his return to reality by a vigorous assault on the cords constricting the mouth of his bag.

Slop seems at least equally determined to "deliver" his obstetrical paraphernalia as he is to deliver Walter Shandy's child. His logical course would be to take his fingernails or teeth to the knots; but his fingernails have been cut short in the way of his profession and his three front teeth were knocked out when his forceps gave way in a difficult confinement. To launch his attack he is obliged to borrow a penknife:

Pox take the fellow! I shall never get the knots untied as long as I live. ----My mother gave a groan ---Lend me your penknife---I must e'en cut the knots at last---pugh!---psha!---Lord! I have cut my thumb quite across to the very bone---curse the fellow---if there was not another man-midwife within fifty miles---I am undone for this bout---I wish the scoundrel hang'd---I wish he was shot---I wish all the devils in hell had him for a blockhead---

My father had a great respect for Obadiah, and could not bear to hear him disposed of in such a manner---he had moreover some little respect for himself---and could as ill bear with the indignity offer'd to himself in it.

Had Dr. Slop cut any part about him, but his thumb---my father had pass'd it by---his prudence had triumphed: as it was, he was determined to have his revenge.

Small curses, Dr. Slop, upon great occasions, quoth my father, (condoling with him first upon the accident) are but so much waste of our strength and soul's health to no manner of purpose. ...

(pp. 168-169)

The violent delivery of the instruments strongly foreshadows what will occur in the delivery of Tristram. Slop will crush Tristram's nose with his forceps just as he slices his own thumb with the penknife. Tristram, however, will be too young to vent his curses on Slop as Slop does on Obadiah.

Walter Shandy's reaction to Slop's curses provides a curious and complex demonstration of his own hobbyhorsical irresponsibility. His love of esoterica has led him to believe the seat of human reason lies within the cerebellum and determined him on a breech birth in the erroneous belief that this delivery would better preserve it. For this he needs a dexterous, if unscrupulous, man-midwife. By slicing his thumb Dr. Slop has impaired his already questionable dexterity. Walter Shandy is outraged and attacks the violator of his obstetrical hobby horse astride another of his stable, his theory of curses. Just when time is at a premium a full quarter hour is squandered reading the Roman rite of excommunication.

Time is indeed at a premium, Mrs. Shandy is in a bad way, and Slop's intervention is no longer just Walter Shandy's desire, but a necessity:

----There is no need of that, replied Susannah,--- you had better look to my mistress,---but the midwife would gladly first give you an account how things are, so desires you would go up stairs and speak to her this moment.

Human nature is the same in all professions.

The midwife had just before been put over Dr. Slop's head.---He had not digested it.---No, replied Dr. Slop, 'twould be full as proper, if the midwife came down to me.---I like subordination, quoth my uncle Toby, and but for it, after the reduction of Lisle, I know not what might have become of the garrison of Ghent, in the mutiny for bread in the year Ten.

----Nor, replied Dr. Slop, (parodying my uncle Toby's hobby-horsical reflection, though full as hobby-horsically himself)---do I know, Captain Shandy, what might have become of the garrison above stairs, in the mutiny and confusion I find all things are in at present, but for the subordination of fingers and thumbs to *****---for the application of which Sir, under this accident of mine, comes in so a propos, that without it, the cut upon my thumb might have been felt by the Shandy family, as long as the Shandy family had a name.
(p. 184)

As Susannah laconically puts it, Slop had better look to her mistress. But the flash of panic which made him take a knife to the strings of his green baize bag was no more than that, and once remounted on his hobby horse, he finds ample time to indulge his self-importance by demanding deference from the parish midwife. He also finds ample time to match hobby horses with Uncle Toby by attempting to parody Toby's remark on military subordination. This proves a mistake. What Slop meant to produce in place of his asterisks was his forceps. Unfortunately, he bungles this delivery too, and pulls out his squirt along with them. Toby is left in possession of the field:

"'Good God' cried my uncle Toby, 'are children brought into the world with a squirt?'" (p. 186-Sterne's italics) However, Slop's forceps will have their revenge:

----Upon my honour, Sir, you have tore every bit of the skin quite off the back of both my hands with your forceps, cried my uncle Toby,---and you have crush'd all my knuckles into the bargain with them, to a jelly. 'Tis your own fault, said Dr. Slop,---you should have clinch'd your two fists together into the form of a child's head, as I told you, and sat firm. ---I did so, answered my uncle Toby.---Then the points of my forceps have not been sufficiently arm'd, or the rivet wants closing---or else the cut on my thumb has made me a little aukward, ---or possibly ---'Tis well, quoth my father, interrupting the detail of possibilities,---that the experiment was not first

made upon my child's head piece.----It would not have been a cherry stone the worse, answered Dr. Slop. I maintain it, said my uncle Toby, it would have broke the cerebellum, (unless indeed the skull had been as hard as a granado) and turned it all into a perfect posset. Pshaw! replied Dr. Slop, a child's head is naturally as soft as the pap of an apple;---the sutures give way,---and besides, I could have extracted by the feet after. ... --- I rather wish you would begin that way, quoth my father.

Pray do, added my uncle Toby. (p. 187)

This passage indicates just how dangerous Slop's most prized hobby horse, the sponsorship of his favorite instrument, can be. A grown man's knuckles are far sturdier than an infant's head, and the pain to which his knuckles were subjected was enough to cause that mildest of men, Toby Shandy, to cry out in genuine anger. It might have been Tristram's head. Toby's final encouragement of the feet first delivery suggests that if any part of his brother's child is to be subjected to Slop's fiendish contraption it had better be a part located as far from the head as anatomically possible. After Toby's experience it is frighteningly apparent that Tristram will be very lucky to get off with nothing worse than a crushed nose.

The threat Slop's forceps pose to Tristram's manhood becomes even more apparent in the following passage:

----And pray, good woman, after all, will you take upon you to say, it may not be the child's hip, as well as the child's head?---'tis most certainly the head, replied the midwife. Because, continued Dr. Slop, (turning to my father) as positive as these old ladies generally are,---'tis a point very difficult to know,---and yet of the greatest consequence to be known;---because, Sir, if the hip is mistaken for the head,---there is a possibility (if it is a boy) that the forceps *****

***** ---What the possibility was, Dr. Slop whispered very low to my father, and then to my uncle Toby. ---
 --There is no such danger continued he, with the head. No, in truth, quoth my father,----but when your possibility has taken place at the hip,---you may as well take off the head too. (pp. 187-188)

Though motivated solely by his hobbyhorsical desire to play the expert at the parish midwife's expense, Slop's pessimistic warning of the possibility of castration becomes an unconscious threat. It seems almost inevitable Tristram will be sexually impaired in some manner. If his hip presents he may suffer a genuine castration. As it turns out, Tristram's head presents and his castration, Slop's breaking of his nose, is merely symbolic.

After firing his parting shot Dr. Slop leaves Walter Shandy and his brother to wait in the parlor, and goes upstairs to Mrs. Shandy. Two hours pass. Dr. Slop is supposedly about his business upstairs, the Shandy brothers are napping, and the house is quiet. Suddenly a hinge creaks:

Pray what's the matter? Who is there? cried my father, waking, the moment the door began to creak. ... 'Tis nothing, an' please your honour, said Trim, but two mortars I am bringing in.---They shan't make a clatter with them here, cried my father hastily. ---If Dr. Slop has any drugs to pound, let him do it in the kitchen.---May it please your honour, cried Trim,---they are two mortar-pieces for a siege next summer, which I have been making out of a pair of jack-boots, which Obadiah told me your honour had left off wearing.---By heaven! cried my father, springing out of his chair, as he swore,---I have not one appointment belonging to me, which I set so much store by, as I do by these jack-boots, --- they were our great-grandfather's, brother Toby,---they were hereditary. Then I fear, quoth my uncle Toby, Trim has cut off the entail.---I have only cut off the tops, an' please your honour, cried Trim.---- I hate perpetuities as much as any man alive, cried my father,----but these jack-boots continued he,

(smiling, though very angry at the same time) have been in the family, brother, ever since the civil wars;---Sir Roger Shandy wore them at the battle of Marston-Moor.----I declare I would not have taken ten pounds for them. (pp. 204-205)

Walter Shandy spends a few more minutes railing against Uncle Toby and his hobby horse, at last makes peace, and turns to question Trim as to the source of a noise he hears in the kitchen. Trim's answer, that it is only Dr. Slop, surprises Walter Shandy:

----Why, I thought Dr. Slop had been above stairs with my wife, and so said you.----What can the fellow be puzzling about in the kitchen?----He is busy, an' please your honour, replied Trim, in making a bridge.----'Tis very obliging in him, quoth my uncle Toby;----pray give my humble service to Dr. Slop, Trim, and tell him I thank him heartily.

You must know, my uncle Toby mistook the bridge as widely as my father mistook the mortars ...

(p. 206)

----This unfortunate draw-bridge of yours, quoth my father ----God bless your honour, cried Trim, 'tis a bridge for master's nose. ----In bringing him into the world with his vile instruments, he has crush'd his nose, Susannah says, as flat as a pancake to his face, and he is making a false bridge with a piece of cotton and a thin piece of whalebone out of Susannah's stays, to raise it up.

-----Lead me, brother Toby, cried my father, to my room this instant. (pp. 214-215)

The moment my father got up into his chamber, he threw himself prostrate across his bed in the wildest disorder imaginable, but at the same time, in the most lamentable attitude of a man borne down with sorrows, that ever the eye of pity dropp'd a tear for. (pp. 215-216)

After having studied the foregoing quotations, the reader may ask himself three questions: "What is the significance of

the jack-boots?" "Why does Walter Shandy abandon himself to such extravagant grief at the breaking of his child's nose?" and "How do these two incidents relate to the sexual incompetence of the Shandy brothers?"

To learn the answer to all three questions it is necessary to visit Walter Shandy's theoretical stable and take a look at one of his prize steeds: the importance of being born with a long nose. Because the formulation of such theories results from Walter's deflection of sexual energy to his intellect, any influence his theories have on his son is traceable to his sexual incompetence. Here we see Walter Shandy's prejudice in favor of long noses:

He would often declare ... that he did not conceive how the greatest family in England could stand it out against an uninterrupted succession of six or seven short noses.----And for the contrary reason ... That it must be one of the greatest problems in civil life, where the same number of long and jolly noses following one another in a direct line, did not raise and hoist it up into the best vacancies in the kingdom.---He would often boast that the Shandy family rank'd very high in king Harry the VIIIth's time, but owed its rise to no state engine,---he would say,---but to that only; ---but that, like other families, he would add,---it had felt the turn of the wheel, and had never recovered the blow of my great grandfather's nose. (p. 221)

All this might be straightforward enough, did we not take a look at this hobby's pedigree:

---I think it a very unreasonable demand,---cried my great grandfather, twisting up the paper, and throwing it upon the table.---By this account, madam, you have but two thousand pounds fortune, not a shilling more, ---and you insist upon having three hundred pounds a year jointure for it.----

---"Because," replied my great grandmother, "you have little or no nose, Sir." (p. 217)

----'Tis a full inch, continued my great grandfather, pressing up the ridge of his nose with his finger and thumb; and repeating his assertion,---'tis a full inch longer, madam, than my father's---. You must mean your uncle's, replied my great grandmother.
 ----My great grandfather was convinced.----He untwisted the paper, and signed the article. (p. 219)

From these passages, and especially from the excursion into the Shandy family history, it becomes evident that when Walter Shandy thinks of a man's nose he thinks of its size as indicative of the size of its owner's genitals and of his sexual prowess.

"There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so," and Walter Shandy's prostration at the crushing of his son's nose is a case in point. In the light of his attitude toward long noses, Tristram's injury is not merely a facial blemish, but a sort of sexual disablement. And the objective view, that it becomes a symbolic castration only in the light of Walter's theories, does nothing to lessen its effect on Walter Shandy or his attitude toward his son. The role the intellectual manifestation of Walter Shandy's sexual incompetence plays in this castration is two-fold: Walter's desire to have his son delivered feet first has unwittingly brought in Dr. Slop to do the damage, while his prejudice in favor of long noses has provided the damage with its significance.

Once we have learned the real meaning, within the construct of the novel and Walter Shandy's theories, of the breaking of Tristram's nose, the affair of the jack-boots assumes its great premonitory significance. The jack-boots are "hereditary," suggesting the prior and unbroken continuance of the Shandy line. Corporal Trim has "cut off the entail," suggesting, in turn, that

the line will continue no further, that it ends with Tristram. These jack-boots are made an appropriate symbol of sexual inadequacy by the fact that they were once the property of Sir Roger Shandy, Tristram's great-great-grandfather, the man whose short nose Tristram's great-grandfather refers to as "my father's" in the following passage:

----'Tis a full inch, continued my great grandfather, pressing up the ridge of his nose with his finger and thumb; and repeating his assertion,----
'tis a full inch longer, madam, than my father's
---. You must mean your uncle's, replied my great grandmother.

----My great grandfather was convinced.----He
untwisted the paper and signed the article.

(p. 219)

Tristram's great-grandmother's succinct rejoinder, "You must mean your uncle's," suggests that any man having a nose a full inch shorter than her prospective husband's would have been incapable of being his father or anyone else's. Such a man would have been incapable of continuing the Shandy line. Her postulation of an hypothetical and sexually incapable uncle presents a shadowy parallel to another barren branch of the Shandy line, Tristram's own Uncle Toby.

Cutting off the entail along with the tops of the jack-boots is more than a prefigurement of Tristram's broken nose. It is also the second instance of Toby's influence on the mishaps of Tristram Shandy. The first instance of his influence was his suggestion of the "lying in clause" which ultimately kept Mrs. Shandy from being confined in London. Toby has left a bottle rocking on the table's edge. Walter Shandy sends it crashing by enforcing the clause. In the second instance, the

"castration" of the jack-boots, Toby has left out another precarious bottle. His hobby horse, the major outgrowth of his sexual disability, has supplied the need for a pair of mortars. Without Toby's knowledge Corporal Trim upsets the bottle by cutting off the tops of Sir Roger Shandy's jack-boots and breaking the "entail." As before, Toby's role is passive.

Walter Shandy might think the worst over with the breaking of his son's nose, but there is more to come. We left Walter face down on his bed, prostrate with grief. Since then, he has roused himself to a certain extent by philosophizing on his woes. One of his hobby horses has led him to believe his son ruined for life by a crushed nose; now he hopes another will negate the damage:

Now, my dear brother, said my father, replacing his forefinger, as he was coming closer to the point, ---had my child arrived safe into the world, unmartyr'd in that precious part of him---fanciful and extravagant as I may appear to the world in my opinion of christian names, and of that magic bias which good or bad names irresistably impress upon our character and conducts---heaven is witness! that in the warmest transports of my wishes for the prosperity of my child, I never once wished to crown his head with more glory and honour, than what GEORGE or EDWARD would have spread around it.

But alas! continued my father, as the greatest evil has befallen him---I must counteract and undo it with the greatest good.

He shall be christened Trismegistus, brother.

I wish it may answer---replied my uncle Toby, rising up. (p. 279)

Unfortunately, Tristram's christening, like his birth, is precipitant. Tristram falls into a fit and has to be baptised and christened so hurridly that his father has no time to dress and get downstairs. The curate is waiting and Walter is forced

to send the name down by Susannah:

Susannah got the start, and kept it---'tis Tris--- something, cried Susannah---There is no christian name in the world, said the curate, beginning with Tris--- but Tristram. Then 'tis Tristram-gistus, quoth Susannah.
 ----There is no gistus to it, noodle!---'tis my own name, replied the curate, dipping his hand as he spoke into the bason.----Tristram! said he, &c. &c. &c. &c. so Tristram was I called, and Tristram shall I be to the day of my death. (pp. 287-288)

The melancholy consequences of this slip-up are evident in the following passage:

[Walter Shandy would ask his audience] Whether he would take upon him to say, he had ever remember'd,---whether he had ever read,---or even whether he had ever heard tell of a man, call'd Tristram, performing any thing great or worth recording?---No---,he would say, ---TRISTRAM!--- The thing is impossible.

.....
 When this story is compared with the title-page, ---Will not the gentle reader pity my father from his soul? ... In a word, to behold such a one, in his old age, ill-fitted for troubles, ten times in a day suffering sorrow;---ten times in a day calling the child of his prayers TRISTRAM! --- Melancholy dissyllable of sound which, to his ears, was unison to Nicompoop, and every name vituperative under heaven. (pp. 55-56)

Another of Walter Shandy's hobby horses has been betrayed. Like his broken nose, Tristram's misnaming is disastrous only in the light of Walter Shandy's theories. Beyond this, the corruption of "Trismegistus" to the foreshortened "Tristram" may be seen as another symbolic castration.

Though the mishaps attending Tristram's birth and conception end with his mischristening, one more remains to happen, Tristram's inadvertent circumcision. This is Uncle Toby's last bow, and to see him make it we must let five years pass, and slip into Tristram's

chamber:

---'Twas nothing,---I did not lose two drops of blood by it---'twas not worth calling in a surgeon, had he lived next door to us---thousands suffer by choice, what I did by accident. Doctor Slop made ten times more of it, than there was occasion:---some men rise, by the art of hanging great weights upon small wires,---and I am this day (August the 10th, 1761) paying part of the price of this man's reputation. --- O 'twould provoke a stone, to see how things are carried on in this world!---The chamber-maid had left no ***** *** under the bed: ----Cannot you contrive, master, quoth Susannah, lifting up the sash with one hand, as she spoke, and helping me up into the window seat with the other,---cannot you manage, my dear, for a single time to **** * * * * *****?

I was five years old. ----Susannah did not consider that nothing was well hung in our family,---so slap came the sash down like lightening upon us;---Nothing is left,---cried Susannah,----nothing is left-for me, but to run my country.-----

My uncle Toby's house was a much kinder sanctuary; and so Susannah fled to it. (p. 376)

What had Uncle Toby to do with it? The same thing he had to do with the mutilated jack-boots. Corporal Trim, in anticipation of Captain Shandy's need for a couple of fieldpieces, stole the sash's lead counterweights to melt down for cannon (p. 378).

On first glance it seems Toby's hobby horse has reduced Tristram to the same plight as Uncle Toby. Apparently Trim has finally "cut off the entail" and the prophesy of the crushed nose and foreshortened name has been fulfilled. Not so. Tristram does, indeed, come "very hardly by all his religious rites," (p. 385) and the injury proves but a circumcision. For five years, Sir Roger Shandy's mutilated jack-boots, Tristram's crushed nose and foreshortened name have threatened a castration. The trigger was pulled at Tristram's birth and for five years



the hammer has been falling. At last, with the dropping of the sash, the flint strikes the frizzen, the spark falls, and what might have caused an explosion fizzles out in the pan. Apparently, Tristram's manhood is safe.

In conclusion, I would like to restate the nature of the Shandy brothers' sexual incompetence and assess the toll this incompetence has taken on Tristram. First, Uncle Toby.

Toby Shandy's sexual incompetence takes two forms: complete physical disability resulting from his wound in the groin, and his hobby horse, the outgrowth of his need to reduce the trauma of his wounding to a manageable compass. Thus, his sexual incompetence is involuntarily acquired. His physical disablement is the result of mischance, his hobby horse is the result of unconscious sublimation.

The operation of Uncle Toby's sexual incompetence is as independent of his volition as that of the stone wounding him at Namur. Its operation has previously been compared to the act of a man who leaves a bottle sitting precariously for the next passerby to break. Toby's specialty is laying groundwork, adding the "forfeit clause" to his brother's marriage contract, and supplying the hobbyhoriscal need for mortars and fieldpieces. The damage is always done without his instigation or knowledge. He has not asked his brother to enforce the "forfeit clause," nor Corporal Trim to butcher jack-boots and filch counterweights.

Like Toby's, Walter Shandy's incompetence takes more than one form. However, unlike his brother's, Walter's sexual incompetence is not externally acquired. Its source lies within himself, in his inability to make peace with his own virility and his deflection of the vast part of his sexual energy to his intellect. This flood of deflected sexuality results in overcharged and uncritical intellectuality and susceptibility to the specious crazes which form the backbone of his theories and systems. Meanwhile, his physical sexuality has decayed, his procreative ability has been impaired, and his performance of the sexual act mechanized.

Unlike Toby's, Walter's incompetence functions directly. It is his own decision to have Dr. Slop deliver his son; it is in the light of his prized and electively formulated theories that such mischances as Tristram's broken nose and foreshortened name rise to the level of catastrophes.

In the foregoing paragraphs the word "damage" has persistently recurred. Now that we know the modus operandi of each brother's incompetence, it is time to see just what form that damage has taken, or if it has taken any at all.

The most apparent fact about Uncle Toby's sexual incompetence is that it comes of a genuine physical impairment. All the damage it threatens to do Tristram is physical. This damage seems to have been accomplished by three incidents: Toby's suggestion of the "forfeit clause," Trim's mutilation of the jack-boots and his later theft of the sash's counterweights. What, exactly, comes of these three incidents? Very little.

Hasn't Toby's clause given his brother an excuse to get Slop to instigate a breech birth? No, all it has done is prevent Mrs. Shandy from lying in at London. To enforce the clause and call in Dr. Slop was Walter Shandy's idea. What damage has the mutilation of the jack-boots accomplished? None, except to the jack-boots. The incident's significance is solely premonitory. Well, then, what about the sash window? The physical damage is real, but minimal; Tristram lost not two drops of blood by it. His gratuitous circumcision is the only catastrophe Tristram makes light of. But perhaps he protests too much. There was some psychological damage; Slop has made a name for himself by "curing" a reputed castration and Tristram's "reputation" has suffered in consequence (p. 376). Tristram's bruised reputation is about all the damage that can be blamed on Uncle Toby. One might think the strength of Toby's influence would increase in direct ratio to the degree of his sexual impairment, and because this impairment is complete, that the influence of his sexual incompetence would be particularly strong. Ironically, it is not. Most of the damage Tristram suffers is at the hands of Walter Shandy.

Walter's damage is accomplished by both his decayed virility and his overcharged intellect. The decay of his physical prowess has led to his mechanization of the sexual act, rendered Tristram's homunculus a nervous wreck, and set the seal on all Tristram's unaccountable obliquity" (p. 6). His favorite theory has caused him to jeopardize his son's life in an effort to preserve his cerebellum. Another of his theories has exaggerated the damage

to Tristram's nose to the level of a castration. And yet another of his theories has made his son's foreshortened Christian name sound in unison with "every name vituperative under heaven."

All this damage is psychological. It could not have been reassuring for Tristram to grow up under the shadow of all these symbolic castrations. Yet the danger to his manhood appeared to end with the falling of the sash. Or did it? When we reenter Tristram's chamber he is well into middle age:

---Do, my dear Jenny, tell the world for me, how I behaved under one, the most oppressive [disaster] of its kind which could befall me as a man, proud, as he ought to be, of his manhood----

'Tis enough, said'st thou, coming close up to me, as I stood with my garters in my hand, reflecting upon what had not pass'd----'Tis enough, Tristram, and I am satisfied, said'st thou, whispering these words in my ear, **** ** **** ** *****; ---- **** ** **

----any other man would have sunk down to the center--
(pp. 517-518)

How seriously should this one instance of sexual impotence be taken? Evidently, it is not an old condition or his surprise and disappointment would not be so apparent. If it were chronic, he would have already given up. He is middle-aged and consumptive to boot, (p. 518) one bad performance is hardly surprising. Perhaps, growing up knowing his father thought him an unaccountably oblique, short-nosed child of decrepitude whose name was synonymous with Nicompoop, has led him to make more of this one failure than it warrants. Youthful exposure to sexual incompetence may not physically impair one's sexual ability, but it can certainly make one insecure about it. This insecurity is evident in the pride Tristram takes in his "manhood," and the desolation he feels at this incidental "loss" of it. To this extent at least,

Tristram's self-doubts fulfill all the prophecies of his castration.

Reading this paper without having read the book one might think Tristram Shandy a grim Freudian case history. One might think Uncle Toby a pathetic monomaniac, and Walter Shandy a sort of mad scientist. This is not the case. Toby does not fancy himself Tamberlane or Alexander, Walter does not make monsters in his basement. Tristram Shandy is not a case history, but a successful comic novel and all the mishaps which occur are very funny on first reading. What then of the dangers threatening Tristram's life and manhood? They are still there, still real and serious, showing as dark streaks beneath the surface of what at first appears bright and straightforward. Uncle Toby is a harmless old soldier with a laughable monomania; he is also a shy, self-contained man who has seen much physical and emotional suffering. Walter Shandy is an eccentric intellectual with an amusing penchant toward elevating the ridiculous to the sublime, yet one of his theories comes close to killing his son. Dr. Slop is hilariously round and delightfully pompous; he is also professionally incompetent and culpably irresponsible. Gallows humor? Not quite. There is a difference between Sterne's obstetrical comedy and the fatally wounded Mercutio's punning, or the jokes Parson Yorick makes on his deathbed. In Sterne's obstetrical comedy the actors make no conscious mockery of a grim and fatal reality. In it all the mockery is Sterne's. He has used all the dangers and "dark streaks" to their best advantage to create a perilous comedy of unseen pitfalls, perceptible to

the reader but not to the participants. It is a breathless comedy which continually swoops down to the surface of tragedy and pulls up short only at the last moment before impact. It is neither a bright comedy nor a black, but a blend of both. Sterne's masterful balance of the comic and tragic has made the misfortunes of Tristram Shandy into a suspenseful comedy of life itself with all life's chiaroscuro, and all its hairs-breadth escapes.

The end.

Notes

¹ James A. Work, "Introduction," The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman by Laurence Sterne (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1940), p. lx. All quotations from the text of Tristram Shandy follow this edition.

² As will shortly become evident, my major source and support in the writing of this thesis has been the text of Tristram Shandy itself. In the course of my research, I found little appears to have been done with the particular aspects of Shandean sexual inadequacy I propose to treat. However, two publications were of major help: Arthur Cash's Laurence Sterne, the Early and Middle Years contained much useful biographical information; and his article, "The Birth of Tristram Shandy," was the mainstay of my digression into eighteenth-century obstetrics. I am also grateful to Elgin Mellowm for his article, "Narrative Technique in Tristram Shandy," which helped to support my treatment of Dr. Slop as a surrogate Tristram Shandy.

³ "Pregnancy," The Encyclopedia Britannica, 1967 ed.

⁴ Consulted April 12, 1977.

⁵ Uncle Toby's sexual incapacity has been established, or has it? See the conversation between Trim and Bridget in Vol. IX, Ch. 28 (p. 639). In this conversation Sterne seems to contradict all he has led us to believe about Toby's sexual limitations. Or does he? Is he merely indulging his taste for ambiguity? Trim certainly knows the rights of the story, but is he telling the truth or lying to protect his master's reputation? When Trim speaks of Toby's having been "undone for ever" had the stone struck "more in the middle," is he speaking of the loss of Toby's manhood or of his life? If Trim's protest does mean Toby's genitals are intact is this any guarantee of his ability to make use of them? The only unquestionable result of this interview is that Toby, on learning the true motivation of Mrs. Wadman's solicitude regarding his wound, abruptly breaks off his courtship. Does he break off merely to spare his insulted modesty or from a knowledge of his sexual incapacity? Sterne didn't live to settle the point.

⁶ A.R. Towers has treated Toby Shandy's substitution of fortifications for feminine companionship in a character sketch of Uncle Toby in "Sterne's Cock and Bull Story," English Literary History, 24 (1957), 12-29. However, he makes no connection between the genesis of Toby's hobby horse and his wounding at Namur.

[Notes to pages 20-26]

⁷ Arthur H. Cash, "The Birth of Tristram Shandy: Sterne and Dr. Burton," in Studies in the Eighteenth Century: Papers presented at the David Nichol Smith Memorial Seminar, Canberra, 1966, ed. R.F. Brissenden (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1968), p. 138 (Hereafter cited as Cash, "The Birth of Tristram Shandy").

⁸ Arthur H. Cash, Laurence Sterne, The Early and Middle Years (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1975), p. 134 (Hereafter cited as Cash, Laurence Sterne).

⁹ Ibid. The births Greenwood speaks of are undocumented and any letters Sterne may have written during the period are no longer extant. However, Arthur Cash suggests that Greenwood was speaking of stillborn children who, having been buried without christening, would not have been entered into the baptismal record at Sutton. He also suggests that the son who supposedly lived three weeks may have been born in a professional lying-in hospital, location unknown, and christened in the same city shortly after.

¹⁰ Ibid. Dr. Burton and Sterne had become hostilely entangled in 1741, but Arthur Cash argues that, by the time Sterne had begun to write Tristram Shandy in 1759, this antagonism had cooled and Dr. Burton appears satirized as Dr. Slop for purely obstetrical reasons.

¹¹ Cash, Laurence Sterne, p. 225.

¹² Ibid., p. 202.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Cash, "The Birth of Tristram Shandy," p. 135.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 134.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 136.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 142.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 141.

¹⁹ Elgin W. Mellow, "Narrative Technique in Tristram Shandy," Papers on Language and Literature, 9 (1973), 268.

[Notes to pages 26-31]

²⁰ Elgin Mellown, in his article "Narrative Technique in Tristram Shandy," has noted Tristram's prematurity and traced some of the birth parallels between Slop's collision with Obadiah and the "delivery" of the green baize bag. However, his subject did not require the extensive treatment I have found necessary.

²¹ Cash, Laurence Sterne, p. 180.

²² The case for the impersonality of Sterne's obstetrical satire is strengthened by the fact that Dr. Slop was not universally recognized to be a portrayal of John Burton even by his professional colleagues. At least one other "scientifik operator" in Sterne's neighborhood felt the bite of his satire and saw fit to wake Sterne up at the vicarage one morning to rail at him over the "indecent liberties" Sterne had taken with his person. Sterne, exasperated after a prolonged and valiant attempt to persuade him to the contrary, snapped in parting, "Sir, I have not hurt you; but take care: I am not born yet; but heaven knows what I may do in the next two volumes." Wilber L. Cross, The Life and Times of Laurence Sterne (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1929), p. 201.

²³ Cash, "The Birth of Tristram Shandy," p. 146.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 136.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 149-150.

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